PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

1020

CHÉRI *and* THE LAST OF CHÉRI

COLETTE



Colette had a long, varied, and active life. Born in 1873, in Burgundy, she received her elementary education at the local school. She was first married at the age of twenty and her first book appeared under the pseudonym adopted by her husband the notorious 'Willy'. When she left him after years of unhappy married life she worked for six years on the music-hall stage. Then she worked as special reporter and as dramatic critic, and appeared on the 'legitimate' stage in leading roles in dramatizations of her own novels. And all the time she was writing books. In 1935, having divorced her second husband (by whom she had a daughter), she married M. Goudeket with whom she lived in Paris until her death in 1954. For some forty years she was one of the most admired writers in France and in 1936 was elected to the Académie Goncourt. During her last years she was crippled with arthritis but her zest for life was undiminished.

Cover drawing: Matisse's *La Chevelure 'Vol d'une flamme'*

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INTRODUCTION

In France Madame Colette is accepted as a national glory, something to enjoy as well as to be proud of, like Chambertin or the Luxembourg Gardens or the Provençal spring. In the English-speaking countries she is very little known, except to those who like reading French. A dozen or so of her books have been translated but so far as I know without creating much stir among either critics or the public. Must we conclude that she is one of those writers, like Miss Austen and Maurice Barrès, whom it is impossible to export?

I do not see why she should be. She is certainly as French as it is possible to be, earthly French in her values, robustly French in her style. Yet the provincial bourgeois life and the characters, money-minded or devout (sometimes both), that François Mauriac introduces to us are at least as remote as anything in Mme Colette from the experience and sympathies of the English-speaking public; despite which his novels in translation have proved popular. The trouble with her books, I think, is that they are peculiarly difficult to translate.

Before considering this point, let me give some facts about her. Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette was born in 1873 in Burgundy. Her mother was Parisian, her father a retired officer in the French Army. She married, before she was twenty-one, Henry Gauthier-Villars, a brute well known under his pseudonym 'Willy' as a salacious novelist and a critic. Almost all his work was in fact written by a team of friends, into which his wife was eventually enlisted. Mme Colette's first six books were published under his name. The first of these, *Claudine à l'École* (1900), enjoyed such popular success that he ordered her to write three sequels to it. The Claudine novels have a charm of their own, but the *grivoiseries* introduced into them by order from her husband delayed the recognition of Mme Colette as a finely serious and lyrical writer

When in 1906 she left the deplorable Willy, she had already written for her own pleasure and published under her own name, *Sept Dialogues de Bêtes*, in which she revealed her unsurpassed understanding of animals. Though she now chose to earn her living on the music-hall stage as a dancer and mime, she continued to write.

La Vagabonde (1911), *L'Envers du Music Hall*, and *L'Entrave* (both 1913) derive from this experience. In 1912 she married Henry de Jouvenel, an eminent French politician and diplomatist, by whom she had a daughter. *Chéri*, probably her most famous book, appeared in 1920, its sequel, *La Fin de Chéri*, in 1926.

For some forty years now she has been one of the most admired writers in France. The success of her books did not prevent her from returning to the stage in 1925 to act in a dramatized version of *La Vagabonde*. In 1935 she married M. Maurice Goudeket, with whom she now lives in an apartment overlooking the garden of the Palais Royal. In three of her most recent (and in my opinion best-written) books, *De ma Fenêtre*, *L'Étoile Vesper*, and *Le Fanal Bleu*, she describes the invalid's life to which she is now confined by arthritis. But, having enjoyed the privilege of seeing her last September, I can assure her English admirers that her response to life remains enviably spirited. I wish indeed that more among the writers who enjoy excellent health could display anything approaching her gaiety and brio.

sometimes music-hall folk or expensive tarts. She avoids ideas, never discusses religion or politics, and seldom refers to literature or to any of the arts except the Theatre. Desire, jealousy, animals, children, food, drink, flowers: these are the beloved themes which she seldom forsakes.

This world of Mme Colette's imagination is likely to surprise most English readers, and not only by what is left out of it. Flowers and animals, also the landscapes and seascapes and townscapes that she depicts, are of course things we take very seriously. But how odd to treat cookery as an exacting art, and, worse still, to elevate love-making into an erudite, almost religious, ritual! The puritan, the go-getter, and the mystic will agree in being shocked by her scale of values. She accepts the validity of any sensuous pleasure, however abnormal, provided that it does not give pain to others. (Here she is an unconscious disciple of the English Utilitarians, though they never ventured to carry their principles so far.) She condemns not only envy, censoriousness, and anything – except love – that leads to unkindness, but also all calculating behaviour, all vulgarity of spirit, all refusal to appreciate and to enjoy. (Here her morality is, like Gide's, aesthetic.) Her work is devoted to the visible, tangible, audible, tasteable, and smellable world.

Her sense of comedy is exuberant; her understanding of character – within her chosen limits – is profound, all her books glow with a genial warmth of heart, and often her imagination rises to lyrical, ecstatic fervour. So intense is her love of life, so responsive are all her senses, that she envelops every experience in poetry. But poetry is a matter not only of feeling but of words. Her style is an instrument most elaborately fashioned to reveal her temperament. Her immense prestige comes indeed largely from the quality of her prose, which is rich, flawless, intricate, audacious, and utterly individual.

Her vocabulary is enormous, and savoury with archaic and regional words. From her imagination images rush profusely forth like bees from a hive, pollen from poplars, smoke from a cigarette, nudes from the staircase of the Moulin Rouge, platitudes from statesmen, or paintings from Picasso. She can foreshorten the French language as boldly as Mallarmé, she has it trained to obey her caprices like a pony in a circus. All of which is a perpetual feast to the reader,

well as of women is perpetually being subjected to expert scrutiny and discussion, as if they were prize cattle. (The comparison is Mme Colette's.)

In any case the Chéri novels are much more than exact and picturesque evocations of a special milieu. They form the classic analysis of a love-affair between a very young man and a middle-aged woman. The Cherubino and Countess of *The Marriage of Figaro*, Oktavian and the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, are only sketches. Here is a full-length double portrait. It is sure to dismay some readers because the two chief figures take it for granted that the man or woman who gives sexual pleasure is entitled to a material reward, a view not indeed endorsed but accepted by the author as normal in the society she describes. Those to whom such a view is utterly revolting should avoid this volume. But once you allow that it exists, and has in fact been widespread in every civilization with which we are acquainted, then the story of Léa and Chéri becomes amusing, significant, and profoundly touching.

RAYMOND MORTIMER

December 1950

a chronic headache to the translator. Let me quote, almost at random, two short passages with which in this volume Mr Senhouse has been faced:

Il vit briller le regard explicite, borné, si peu féminin, que la femme dédie au donneur de plaisir, et il fut offensé dans sa chasteté inavouable. Il répliqua, de haut en bas, par un autre regard, insociable, compliqué, le regarde de l'homme qui se refuse.

Rompu à une gymnastique d'impassibilité, il s'occupait à subir le capricieux ravage en possédé digne de son démon.

The meaning is clear, but no English writer would think in similar terms, and the English words most nearly equivalent refuse to coalesce. The translator of Mme Colette is always having either to debilitate the original by a comparatively insipid paraphrase or else (which is worse) to disconcert us with phrases that are patently and offensively unnatural. No wonder then that none of the previous translations I have seen strikes me as tolerable; no wonder that Mme Colette is therefore so little known to the English public. I believe that the series of translations now launched by Messrs Secker and Warburg will be good enough to remedy this neglect. At the same time I must ask in advance the reader's indulgence. The difficulty of translating her is more nearly desperate than anyone can know who has not tried his hand at it.

A final word about *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri*. In these novels, and in an enchanting story called *Gigi*, Mme Colette plants us in an unfamiliar world regulated by severe traditions. (Andrée Alvar, in *Gigi*, is looked down upon by her mother and aunt because she is only a singer at the Opéra Comique, having failed to make good in the family profession as an expensive kept woman.) This is the world of the *grandes cocottes*, rivals and successors of La Païva, Liane de Pougy, Émilienne d'Alençon, a world already invested with period charm.

The physical details, you may feel, are sometimes too insistent. The author keeps showing us, as if she were a beauty specialist with a magnifying glass, the most minute particulars of skin and hair and eye. Such, we must presume, are the preoccupations of the society she describes with humorous sympathy. In it the physique of men as

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'GIVE it me, Léa, give me your pearl necklace! Do you hear me, Léa? Give me your pearls!'

No answer came from the huge brass-bedecked wrought-iron bedstead that glimmered in the shadows like a coat of mail.

'Why won't you let me have your necklace? It looks every bit as well on me as on you – even better!'

At the snap of the clasp, ripples spread over the lace-frilled sheets, and from their midst rose two magnificent thin-wristed arms, lifting on high two lovely lazy hands.

'Leave it alone, Chéri! You've been playing long enough with that necklace.'

'It amuses me. .. Are you frightened I'll steal it?'

He was capering about in front of the sun-drenched rosy-pink curtains – a graceful demon, black against a glowing furnace; but when he pranced back towards the bed, he turned white again from top to toe, in his white silk pyjamas and white Moorish slippers.

'I'm not frightened,' the soft, deep voice answered from the bed. 'But you'll wear out the thread. Those pearls are heavy.'

'They certainly are,' Chéri said with due respect. 'Whoever gave you this lot never meant to make light of you!'

He was standing in front of a pier-glass framed in the space between two windows, gazing at the reflection of a very youthful, very good looking young man, neither too short nor too tall, hair with the blue sheen of a blackbird's plumage. He unbuttoned his pyjamas, displaying a hard, darkish chest, curved like a shield; and the whites of his dark eyes, his teeth, and the pearls of the necklace gleamed in the over-all rosy glow of the room.

'Take off that necklace!' The female voice was insistent. 'Do you hear what I say?'

The young man, motionless in front of his image, laughed softly to himself. 'Yes, yes, I heard you. I know so well you're terrified I'll make off with it!'

'No, I'm not. But if I did offer it to you, you're quite capable of taking it.'

'Not really? I'm lunching at the old girl's? You *too*?'

Lazily Léa settled deeper into the bed.

'Not me, I'm off duty. I'll go for coffee at half past two, or tea at six, or for a cigarette at a quarter to eight. Don't worry; she'll always see enough of me. And besides, I've not been asked.'

Chéri's sulky face lit up with malice.

'I know, I know why! We're going to have high society. We're going to have the fair Marie-Laure, and that poisonous child of hers.'

Léa brought her big blue wandering eyes to rest.

'Oh, really! The little girl's charming. Less so than her mother, but charming. Now take off that necklace, once and for all.'

'Pity,' Chéri sighed, as he undid the clasp. 'It would look so well in the trousseau.'

Léa raised herself on her elbow: 'What trousseau?'

'Mine,' Chéri said with ludicrous self-importance. '*My* trousseau, full of *my* jewels, for *my* marriage!'

He bounded in the air, executed a perfect *entrechat-six*, returned to earth, butted his way through the door-curtains, and disappeared, shouting: 'My bath, Rose! And quick about it! I'm lunching at the old girl's!'

'That's that,' Léa thought. 'We'll have a lake in the bathroom and eight towels floating in it, and razor scrapings in the basin. If only I had two bathrooms!'

But, as on former occasions, she soon saw that this would mean getting rid of a wardrobe and lopping off a corner of her dressing-room, and so concluded, as on former occasions: 'I shall simply have to put up with it till Chéri gets married.'

She lay down again on her back and noticed that Chéri, undressing the night before, had thrown his socks on the mantelpiece, his pants on the writing-table, his tie round the neck of her portrait bust. She could not help smiling at this hasty masculine disorder, and half closed her large tranquil eyes. Their blue was as beautiful as ever, and so were the thick chestnut lashes.

At the age of forty-nine, Léonie Vallon, called Léa de Lonval, was nearing the end of a successful career as a richly kept courtesan. She was a good creature, and life had spared her the more flattering catastrophes and exalted sufferings. She made a secret of the date of

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no longer loved in herself: the vivid complexion, healthy, a little too ruddy – an open-air complexion, well suited to emphasize the pure intensity of her eyes, with their varying shades of blue. Her proud nose still won her approval. 'Marie-Antoinette's nose!' Chéri's mother was in the habit of saying, without ever forgetting to add: 'and in another two years our Léa will have a chin like Louis Seize.' Her mouth, with its even row of teeth, seldom opened in a peal of laughter; but she smiled often, a smile that set off to perfection the lazy flutter of her large eyes – a smile a hundred times lauded, sung, and photographed – a deep, confiding smile one never tired of watching.

As for her body – 'Everyone knows', Léa would say, 'that a well-made body lasts a long time.' She could still afford to show her body, pink and white, endowed with the long legs and straight back of a naiad on an Italian fountain, the dimpled hips, the high-slung breasts, 'would last', Léa used to say, 'till well after Chéri's wedding.'

She got out of bed, and, slipping into a wrap, went to draw back the long curtains. The noonday sun poured into the gay, rosy, over-decorated room. Its luxury dated: double lace curtains, rose-bud watered silk on the walls, gilded woodwork, and antique furniture upholstered in modern silks. Léa refused to give up either this cosy room or its bed, a massive and indestructible masterpiece of wrought iron and brass, grim to the eye and cruel to the shins.

'Come, come!' Chéri's mother protested, 'it's not as bad as all that. Personally, I like this room. It belongs to a period. It has a style of its own. It suggests La Païva.'

The remembrance of this dig made Léa smile as she pinned up her hair. She hurriedly powdered her face on hearing two doors slam, and the thud of a male foot colliding with some delicate piece of furniture. Chéri came back into the room in shirt and trousers, his ears white with talcum powder. He was in an aggressive mood.

'Where's my tie-pin? What a wretched hole this is! Have they taken to pinching the jewellery?'

'Marcel must have stuck it in his tie to go to the market,' Léa gravely replied.

Chéri, who had little or no sense of humour, was brought up short by the little quip like an ant by a lump of coal. He stopped his angry

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wear a pearl on top of all that! You little dago. ... Why not earrings into the bargain?'

His defences were down. Blissful, languid, irresolute, supine, he surrendered again to a lazy happiness and closed his eyes. ...

'Nounoune darling ...' he murmured.

She brushed the hair off his ears, combed a straighter parting in the bluish locks of his black hair, dabbed a little scent on his temples, and gave him a quick kiss, unable to resist the tempting mouth so close to her own.

Chéri opened his eyes, and his lips, then stretched out his hands.

She moved away. 'No. It's a quarter to one! Be off now, and don't let me see you again!'

'Never?'

'Never,' she laughed back at him with uncontrollable tenderness.

Left to herself, she smiled proudly, and a sharp little sigh of defeated desire escaped her as she listened to Chéri's footsteps *crossing the courtyard. She saw him open and close the gates,* drift away on his winged feet, only to encounter the adoring glances of three shop girls walking along arm-in-arm.

'Lawks! He's too good to be true! Let's touch him to see if he's real!'

But Chéri took it all for granted and did not even turn round.

'Does Madame think so?'

'Madame does think so. Add a little turpentine while you're melting it in a double saucepan; it's quite easy to do again. You brought up the Vouvray a little too soon. Close the shutters as soon as you've cleared the table; we're in for a heat-wave.'

'Very good, Madame. Will Monsieur Ch – Monsieur Peloux be dining?'

'Probably. .. No *crème-surprise* tonight. We'll just have a strawberry water ice. Coffee in the boudoir.'

As she rose from the table, straight and tall, the shape of her legs visible under a dress that moulded her hips, she had ample time to note the 'Madame is beautiful' in the butler's discreet glance, and this did not displease her.

'Beautiful,' Léa whispered on her way up to the boudoir. 'No. ... No longer. I have now to wear something white near my face, and very pale pink underclothes and tea-gowns. Beautiful! Pish. ... I hardly need to be that any longer.'

All the same, she allowed herself no siesta in the painted silk boudoir, when she had finished with coffee and the newspapers. And it was with battle written on her face that she gave her chauffeur the order. 'To Madame Peloux's.'

The tree-lined road through the Bois, dry beneath the young, already arid, faded June foliage – the toll-gate – Neuilly – Boulevard d'Inkermann – 'How many times have I come this way?' Léa wondered. She began to count, then tired of counting and softened her tread on the gravel outside Madame Peloux's house to overhear any sounds coming from it.

'They're in the garden-room,' she concluded.

She had put on more powder before approaching the house and tightened the fine-mesh, misty blue veil under her chin. Her answer to the manservant's formal request to come through the house was: 'No, I'd rather go round by the garden.'

A real garden – almost a park – completely surrounded the vast white villa, typical of the outer suburbs of Paris. Madame Peloux's villa had been called 'a country residence' in the days when Neuilly



'Goodness, how lovely you are, Marie-Laure! you're perfection itself!'

Marie-Laure deigned to smile. She was a red-haired young woman with brown eyes, whose physical presence alone was enough to take your breath away. She drew attention, almost coquettishly, to the other young woman, by saying: 'But would you have recognized my daughter Edmée?'

Léa held out a hand which the girl was reluctant to shake.

'I should have known you, my child, but a schoolgirl alters so quickly, and Marie-Laure alters only to become always more disconcertingly lovely. Are you quite finished with school now?'

'I should hope so, I should hope so,' exclaimed Madame Peloux. 'You can't go on for ever, hiding her under a bushel, such a miracle of grace and charm, and she's nineteen already!'

'Eighteen,' said Marie-Laure sweetly.

'Eighteen, eighteen! .. Yes of course, eighteen! Léa, you remember? This child was just making her first Communion the year that Chéri ran away from school, surely you remember? Yes, yes, you did, you little good-for-nothing, you ran away and Léa and I were driven nearly out of our wits!'

'I remember perfectly,' Léa said, and she exchanged an imperceptible little nod with Marie-Laure – something corresponding to the '*touché*' of a punctilious fencer.

'You must get her married soon, you must get her married soon!' pursued Madame Peloux, who never failed to repeat a basic truth at least twice. 'We'll all come to the wedding.'

She brandished her little arms in the air, and the young girl glanced at her with ingenuous alarm.

'She's just the daughter for Marie-Laure,' thought Léa, gazing at her more closely. 'She has all her mother's dazzling qualities but in a quieter key fluffy, ash-brown hair, that looks as if it were powdered; frightened, secretive eyes and a mouth she avoids opening even to speak or smile. ... Exactly what Marie-Laure needs as a foil – but how she must hate her!'

Madame Peloux insinuated a maternal smile between Léa and the young girl. 'You ought to have seen how well these two young people were getting on together in the garden!'



handed them over to Chéri. On her return, she found that Léa had taken off her hat and was smoking a cigarette.

'Aren't they sweet, those two!' Madame Peloux gasped. 'Don't you think so, Léa?'

'Delicious,' Léa breathed out in the same puff as her cigarette smoke. 'But really, that Marie-Laure!'

'What's Marie-Laure been up to?' asked Chéri, as he rejoined them.

'How lovely she is!'

'Ah! Ah!' Madame Peloux began in formal assent. 'That's true, that's true. She has been really lovely.'

Chéri and Léa caught each other's eye and laughed.

'Has been?' Léa emphasized the past tense. 'But she's the picture of youth. Not a single wrinkle! And she can wear the palest mauve, such a foul colour! I loathe it and it loathes me.'

Madame Peloux raised her big pitiless eyes and thin nose from her brandy-glass.

'The picture of youth, the picture of youth!' yapped Madame Peloux. 'Pardon me, pardon me! Marie-Laure had Edmée in 1895, no ... '94. She'd just run away with a singing-teacher, leaving Khalil Bey flat, though he'd given her the famous pink diamond which ... No, no! Wait! .. That must have been the year before!'

The trumpet notes were shrill and off key. Léa put a hand over her ear, and Chéri declared, with some feeling: 'Everything would be heavenly on an afternoon like this, if only we could be spared my mother's voice!'

She looked at her son with no sign of anger, accustomed to his insolence. Dignified, feet dangling, she settled herself back in a basket chair too high for her short legs. In one hand she warmed her glass of brandy Léa, rocking herself gently to and fro, glanced occasionally at Chéri, who lay sprawled on a cool cane settee, coat unbuttoned, a cigarette dying between his lips, a lock of hair over one eyebrow. 'He's a handsome young blackguard,' she thought admiringly

There they remained, peacefully side by side, making no effort to talk or be sociable, happy after their own fashion. Years of close familiarity rendered silence congenial and Chéri slipped back into



'Why doesn't she go to sleep?' Léa wondered. 'It's Sunday. She's lunched well. She's expecting her sponging old cronies to drop in for her five o'clock tea. By rights she ought to be having a snooze. If she's not snoozing, it's because she's up to some devilment or other.'

They had known each other for twenty-five years. Theirs was the hostile intimacy of light women, enriched and then cast aside by one man, ruined by another: the tetchy affection of rivals stalking one another's first wrinkle or white hair. Theirs was the friendship of two practical women of the world, both adepts at the money game; but one of them a miser, and the other a sybarite. These bonds count. Rather late in their day, a stronger bond had come to link them more closely: Chéri.

Léa could remember Chéri as a little boy – a marvel of beauty with long curls. When quite small he was known as Fred, and had not yet been nicknamed Chéri.

Sometimes forgotten and sometimes adored, Chéri grew up among wan housemaids and tall sardonic menservants. Although his birth had mysteriously brought wealth to the house, no 'Fräulein', no 'Miss' was ever to be seen at Chéri's side; and his mother had preserved him, to the accompaniment of piercing shrieks, *from* 'these ghouls'.

'Charlotte Peloux, you belong to another age.' The speaker was the moribund, mummified, but indestructible Baron de Berthellemy. 'Charlotte Peloux, in you I salute the only light woman who ever had the courage to bring up her son as the son of a tart! You belong to another age! You never read, you never travel, you make a point of knowing your neighbour's business, and you abandon your child to the tender mercies of the servants. How perfect! How absolutely About!* .. Or, better still, how like a novel by Gustav Droz. ... And to think that you've never heard of either! ...'

* Edmond About (*Roman d'un brave homme*, etc.) and Gustave Droz (*Monsieur, Madame et Bébé*, etc.), light popular novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century, some of whose books appeared in English translation, *Papa, Mamma and Baby*, illustrated by Morin 1887

likely to die a comfortable death in your downy bed, I don't altogether fancy a trustee for my estate. Your cash is mine. Let me go my own way! Men friends cost next to nothing – a dinner and a bottle of champagne. As for the fair sex, surely, Ma'me Peloux, seeing that I take after you, you can trust me not to treat 'em to more than a trinket – if that!'

He pirouetted about while she shed tears and proclaimed herself the happiest of mothers. When Chéri began buying motor-cars, she trembled once more; but he simply advised her: 'Keep an eye on the petrol, Ma'me Peloux, if you please!' and sold his horses. He was not above checking the two chauffeurs' books His calculations were quick and accurate, and the figures he jotted down on slips of paper – dashed off rapidly, round and regular – were in marked contrast to his rather slow and childish handwriting.

At seventeen he was like a little old man, always fussing over his expenses: still good-looking – but skinny and short-winded. More than once Madame Peloux ran into him on the cellar steps, coming up from checking the bottles in the racks and bins.

'Would you believe it?' she said to Léa. 'It's too wonderful.'

'Much too wonderful,' Léa answered, 'he'll come to a bad end. Chéri! Show me your tongue!'

He put out his tongue, made a face, and showed other signs of disrespect. Léa took no notice. She was too intimate a friend, a sort of doting godmother, whom he called by her Christian name.

'Is it true', Léa inquired, 'that you were seen last night at a bar, sitting on old Lili's knees?'

'Her knees!' scoffed Chéri. 'She hasn't had any for ages. They foundered years ago.'

'Isn't it true', Léa persisted with greater severity, 'that she made you drink gin laced with pepper? You know gin is bad for the breath!'

On one occasion, Chéri, hurt, snapped back at Léa: 'I can't think why you bother me with all these questions. You must have seen what I was up to, you were tucked away in that cubby-hole at the back, with Patron your prize-fighter friend.'

'That's perfectly correct,' Léa answered, unmoved. 'There's

'Out of politeness to Ma'me Peloux – who would otherwise be drinking alone,' Chéri answered.

'What are you going to do tomorrow?'

'Dunno, and you?'

'I'm off to Normandy.'

'With?'

'That's none of your business.'

'With our friend Spéleïeff?'

'Don't be so stupid. That was over two months ago. You're behind the times. Spéleïeff's in Russia.'

'Chéri, darling, what can you be thinking of?' sighed Madame Peloux. 'Don't you remember going last month to the charming dinner given by Léa to celebrate the end of the affair? Léa, you've never let me have the recipe for those langoustines I enjoyed so much.'

Chéri sat up, his eyes sparkling. 'Yes, yes, langoustines, swimming in a creamy sauce! How I'd like some now!'

'You see,' Madame Peloux said reproachfully, 'he's got no appetite to speak of and yet he's asking for langoustines.'

'Shut up!' Chéri snapped. 'Léa, are you off to the shady woods with Patron?'

'Certainly not, my boy. Patron and I are merely friends. I'm going on my own.'

'Nice to be so rich!' Chéri threw out.

'I'll take you with me, if you like there'll be nothing to do but eat and drink and sleep....'

'Where is this place of yours?' He had risen to his feet and was standing over her.

'You know Honfleur – the Côte de Grâce – don't you? Sit down; you're green in the face. Now as you go down the Côte de Grâce, you know those farm gates where we always say, in passing, your mother and I ...'

She turned round to where Madame Peloux was sitting. Madame Peloux had disappeared. The discretion with which she had faded away was something so unlike the normal Charlotte Peloux, that they looked at each other and laughed in surprise.

Chéri sat down close to Léa. 'I'm tired,' he said.

nothing of the dissipated schoolboy about Patron. He has other attractions, and a good deal more to recommend him than a perky little face and two black rings round his eyes.'

That week Chéri had been out on the razzle in Montmartre and les Halles, consorting with ladies of the town who called him 'poppet' and 'my pet vice', but he had got no kick out of it: he suffered from migraines and a dry cough. Madame Peloux poured out her heart-breaking woes – 'Life is nothing but a series of crosses for us mothers' – to her masseuse, to her stay-maker, Madame Ribot, to old Lili, to the Baron de Berthellemy, and thus passed painlessly from the state of being the happiest-of-parents to that of the martyr-mother.

A night in June, when Madame Peloux and Léa and Chéri were together in the garden-room at Neuilly, was to change the destinies of the young man and the middle-aged woman. Chéri's friends had gone off for the evening – little Baxter, a wholesale wine-merchant, and the Vicomte Desmond, a hanger-on of his, barely of age, difficult and arrogant – and so Chéri had returned to the maternal fold, and habit had drawn Léa there also.

For one more evening, in a whole sequence of such occasions, these two women, each suspicious of the other, found themselves together. They had known each other for twenty years, they shared a past made up of similarly dull evenings; they lacked other friends; and, in their later days, they had become mistrustful, self-indulgent, and cut off from the world, as women are who have lived only for love.

Both were staring in silence at Chéri, who never spoke. Madame Peloux lacked the strength to take her son's health in hand, but hated Léa a little more each time she bent her white neck and glowing cheeks over Chéri's pallid cheek and transparent ear. She would willingly have bled that healthy female neck, already wrinkled by the so-called lines of Venus, in order to give a touch of colour to her slim lily-green son: yet it never occurred to her to take her darling away to the country.

'Chéri, why are you drinking brandy?' Léa scolded.

She shook her head only at the very instant that their lips touched, then she remained absolutely motionless, and *held her* breath like someone listening. When he released his hold, she broke away from him, rose to her feet, took a deep breath, and put a hand up to tidy her unruffled hair. She turned to *him*, rather pale and with rueful eyes, and said, teasingly: 'That was a bright idea!'

He lay far back in the rocking-chair, speechless, and scrutinized her with a suspicious, questioning gaze, so that she asked: 'What is it?'

'Nothing,' Chéri said. 'I know what I wanted to know.'

She blushed with humiliation, then skilfully defended herself.

'What do you know? That I like your mouth? My poor child, I've kissed uglier. What does that prove? D'you think I'm going to fling myself at your feet and cry, "Take me!" You talk as if you've known only nice young girls! D'you imagine I'm going to lose my head because of a kiss?'

She grew calmer while speaking and wished to prove her self-control.

'Listen, child,' she persisted, as she leaned over him, 'd'you think a handsome mouth means anything to me?'

She smiled down at him, completely sure of herself, but unaware that there remained on her face a sort of very faint quiver, an appealing sadness, and that her smile was like a rainbow after a sudden storm.

'I'm perfectly calm. Even if I were to kiss you again, or even if we ...' She stopped and pouted with scorn. 'No, no, I really can't see you and me doing that.'

'Nor *could* you see us doing what we did just now,' Chéri said, taking time over his words. 'And yet you don't mind doing it, and not in a hurry, either. So now you're thinking of going further, are you? *I* never suggested such a thing.'

They faced each other like enemies. Léa was *afraid* to reveal a desire she had not yet had time to develop or to disguise; she resented this child, so suddenly cold and perhaps derisive.

'You're right,' she conceded lightly. 'Let's say no more about it. Shall we say instead that I'm offering to put you out to grass! And the food will be good ... *my* food, in other words.'

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WHEN Léa recalled their first summer in Normandy, she would sum it up impartially: 'I've had other naughty little boys through my hands, more amusing than Chéri, more likeable, too, and more intelligent. But all the same, never one to touch him.'

'It's funny,' she confided to the old Baron de Berthellemy, towards the end of the summer of 1906, 'but sometimes I think I'm in bed with a Chinee or an African.'

'Have you ever had a Chinaman or a Negro?'

'Never.'

'Well then?'

'I don't know. I can't explain. It's just an impression.'

The impression had grown upon her slowly, also an astonishment she had not always been able to conceal. Her earliest memories of their idyll were abundantly rich, but only in pictures of delicious food, superb fruit, and the pleasure of taking pains over her country larder. She could still see Chéri – paler in the blazing sunlight – dragging along his exhausted body beneath the lime-tree tunnels in Normandy, or asleep on the sun-warmed paving beside a pond.

Léa used to rouse Chéri from sleep to cram him with strawberries and cream, frothy milk, and corn-fed chicken. With wide, vacant eyes, as though dazed, he would sit at dinner watching the mazy motions of the moths round the bowl of roses, and then look at his wrist-watch to see whether the time had come to go to bed: while Léa, disappointed but unresentful, pondered over the unfulfilled promises of the kiss at Neuilly and good-naturedly bided her time.

'I'll keep him cooped up in this fattening-pen till the end of August, if need be. Then, back in Paris again – ouf! – I'll pack him off to his precious studies.'

She went to bed mercifully early, so that Chéri – after nuzzling against her till he had hollowed out a selfishly comfortable position – might get some sleep. Sometimes, when the lamp was out, she would watch a pool of moonlight shimmering over the polished floor, or listen, through the chorus of rustling aspens and shrilling crickets,

stopped myself in time, it would have had a nasty taste of the stitches on my right glove.'

'I slipped,' Chéri said, enraged.

'It's not a question of balance,' Patron went on, 'it's a question of morale. You'll never make a boxer.'

'My mother won't let me, isn't that a pity?'

'Whether your mother lets you or not, you'll never make a boxer, because you've got a rotten temper. Rotten tempers and boxing don't go together. Aren't I right, Madame Léa?'

Léa smiled, and revelled in the warm sun, sitting still and watching the bouts between these two men, both young and both stripped. In her mind she kept comparing them. 'How handsome Patron is – as solid as a house! And the boy's shaping well. You don't find knees like his running about the streets every day of the week, or I'm no judge. His back, too, is ... will be .. marvellous. Where the devil did Mother Peloux drop her line to fish up a child like that? And the set of his head! quite a statue! But what a little beast he is! When he laughs, you'd swear it's a greyhound snarling!' She felt happy and maternal – bathed in quiet virtue. 'I'd willingly change him for anyone else,' she said to herself, with Chéri naked in the afternoon beside her under the lime-tree bower, or with Chéri naked in the morning on her ermine rug, or Chéri naked in the evening on the edge of the warm fountain. 'Yes, handsome as he is, I'd willingly make a change, if it weren't a question of conscience!'

She confessed her indifference to Patron.

'And yet', Patron objected, 'the lad's very nicely made. There's muscles on him now such as you don't see on our French lads; his are more like a coloured boy's – though he couldn't look any whiter, I must say. Nice little muscles they are, and not too showy. He'll never have biceps like melons.'

'I should hope not, Patron! But then, you know, I didn't take him on for his boxing!'

'Of course not,' Patron acquiesced, letting his long lashes droop, 'there's – your feelings to be considered.'

He was always embarrassed by Léa's unveiled allusions to sex, and by her smile – the insistence of the smiling eyes she brought to bear on him whenever she spoke of love.

Chéri, whom they thought either asleep or motoring down some baking hot road – Chéri, looming into sight, half naked, but equipped with an account book, a stylo behind his ear.

'Look at our Mister Adding-machine,' Patron said admiringly. 'All got up as a clerk in a bank.'

'What can this mean?' Chéri shouted from afar. 'Three hundred and twenty francs for petrol? Somebody must be swilling the stuff! We've been out four times in the last fortnight – and seventy-seven francs for oil!'

'The motor goes to the market every day,' Léa replied. 'And while we're on the subject, it appears your chauffeur had three helpings of the joint for his dinner. Don't you think that's stretching our agreement a bit far? ... Whenever a bill sticks in your throat, you look just like your mother.'

At a loss for an answer, he stood uncertain for a moment, shifting from one slender foot to the other, poised with winged grace like a young Mercury. This always made Madame Peloux swoon with delight and yelp, 'Me when I was eighteen! Winged feet! winged feet!' He cast about for some insolent retort, his whole face a-quiver, his mouth half open, his forehead jutting forward, in a tense attitude that showed off to advantage the peculiar and diabolic upward twist of his eyebrows.

'Don't bother to think of an answer,' Léa said kindly. 'I know you hate me. Come and kiss me. Handsome devil. Fallen angel. Silly goose. ..'

He came, calmed by the softness of her voice, yet ruffled by her words. Seeing them together, Patron once again let the truth flower on his guileless lips.

'As far as first-rate bodies go, Monsieur Chéri, you have one all right. But whenever I look at it, Monsieur Chéri, I feel that if I was a woman I'd say to myself "I'll come back again in ten years' time."'

'You hear, Léa? He says in ten years' time,' Chéri said insinuatingly, pushing away the head of his mistress as she leaned towards him. 'What do you think of that?'

But she did not deign to listen. The young body owed to her its renewed vigour, and she began patting it all over, touching it

hear his confession, and pressed her forehead against his, whispering, 'Speak. Say something. Tell me ...'

But no confession came from those curved lips, scarcely anything indeed but sulky or frenzied phrases woven round 'Nounoune' – the name he had given her when a child and the one he now used in the throes of his pleasure, almost like a cry for help.

'Yes, I assure you, he might be a Chinee, or an African,' she declared to Anthime de Berthellemy, and added, 'I can't tell you why.' The impression was strong but confused, and she felt lazily incompetent to find words for the feeling that she and Chéri did not speak the same language.

It was the end of September when they returned to Paris. Chéri went straight to Neuilly, the very first evening, to 'spring a surprise' on Madame Peloux. He brandished chairs, cracked nuts with his fist, leaped on to the billiard-table, and played cowboy in the garden at the heels of the terrified watch-dogs.

'Ouf!' Léa sighed, as she entered her house in the Avenue Bugeaud, alone. 'How wonderful! – a bed to myself!'

But at ten o'clock the following night she was sipping coffee and trying not to find the evening too long or the dining-room too large, when a nervous cry was forced from her lips. Chéri had suddenly appeared, framed in the doorway – Chéri, wafted on silent, winged feet.

He was not speaking or showing any sign of affection, but just running towards her.

'Are you mad?'

Shrugging his shoulders, disdaining all explanations, just running towards her. Never asking 'Do you love me?', 'Have you already forgotten me?' Running towards her.

A moment later they were lying in the middle of Léa's great brass-encumbered bed. Chéri pretended to be worn out and sleepy. This made it easier to grit his teeth and keep his eyes tight shut, suffering as he was from a furious attack of taciturnity. Yet, through his silence, she was listening as she lay beside him, listening with delight to the distant delicate vibration, to the imprisoned tumult thrumming within a body that sought to conceal its agony, its gratitude, and love.

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'*It's lucky for me that there'll soon be someone else to stop you* smoking on an empty stomach.'

'Oh! *she* won't be allowed to have a say in anything,' Chéri declared. 'She's going to be my wife, isn't she? Let her kiss the sacred ground I tread on, and thank her lucky stars for the privilege. And that will be that.'

He exaggerated the thrust of his chin, clenched his teeth on his cigarette-holder, parted his lips, and, as he stood there in his white silk pyjamas, succeeded only in looking like an Asiatic prince grown pale in the impenetrable obscurity of palaces.

Léa drew the folds of her pink dressing-gown closer about her – the pink she called 'indispensable'. She was lazily turning over ideas which she found tiresome, ideas that she decided to hurl, one by one, as missiles against Chéri's assumed composure.

'Well, why are you marrying the child?'

He put both elbows on the table and, unconsciously, assumed the composed features of his mother. 'Well, you see, my dear girl ...'

'Call me Madame or Léa. I'm *neither* your housemaid nor a pal of your own age.'

She sat straight up in her armchair and clipped her words without raising her voice. He wanted to answer back. He looked defiantly at the beautiful face, a little pale under its powder, and at the frank blue light of her searching eyes. But he softened, and conceded, in a tone most unusual for him, 'Nounoune, you asked me to explain. ... It had to come to this in the end. And besides, there are big interests at stake.'

'Whose?'

'Mine,' he said without a smile. 'The girl has a considerable fortune of her own.'

'From her father?'

He rocked himself to and fro, his feet in the air. 'Oh, how do I know? What a question! I *suppose* so. You'd hardly expect the fair Marie-Laure to draw fifteen hundred thousand out of her own bank account, would you? Fifteen hundred thousand, and some decent family jewels into the bargain.'

'And how much have *you*?'

'Oh, I've more than that of my own,' he said with pride.

Léa smiled. 'But, my darling, I've not the slightest intention of changing my life. Now and then, during the next week, I'll come across a pair of socks, a tie, a handkerchief on my shelves ... and when I say a week .. you know in what excellent order my shelves are kept! Oh, yes, and I'll have the bathroom redone. I've got an idea of putting in encrusted glass. ...'

She fell silent and assumed an almost greedy look as she traced a vague outline with her finger. Chéri continued to look vindictive.

'You aren't pleased! What do you want, then? Do you expect me to go to Normandy to hide my grief? To pine away? To stop dyeing my hair? To have Madame Peloux rushing to my bedside?' And she imitated Madame Peloux, flapping her arms and trumpeting: '"The shadow of her former self, the shadow of her former self! The poor unfortunate creature has aged a hundred years, a hundred years!" Is that what you want?'

He had been listening with a smile that died on his lips, and a trembling of the nostrils that might be due to emotion. 'Yes!' he cried.

Léa rested her smooth, bare, heavy arms on Chéri's shoulders.

'My poor boy! But at that rate, I ought to have died four or five times already! To lose a little lover. ... To exchange one naughty little boy. ...' She added in lower, lighter tones: 'I've grown used to it!'

'We all know that,' he said harshly. 'I don't give a damn – d'you hear me? – I don't give a single damn that I wasn't your first lover. What I should have liked, or rather what would have been ... fitting ... decent .. is to be your last.' With a twist of his shoulders, he shrugged off her superb arms. 'After all, what I am saying to you now is for your own good.'

'I understand perfectly. You think only of me. I think only of your fiancée. That's all very nice, all very natural. It's clear that we both have hearts of gold.'

She rose, waiting for some outrageous rejoinder. But he said nothing, and it hurt her to see for the first time a look of discouragement on his face.

She bent over and put her hands under his armpits.

'Now then, come along, get your clothes on. I've only to put on

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THEY both became extremely gay for the next few weeks. Chéri's official duties as a fiancé separated them for a few hours each day, sometimes for a night or two. '*We mustn't* let them lose confidence,' Chéri declared. Léa, kept by Madame Peloux at a safe distance from Neuilly, satisfied her curiosity by plying Chéri with a hundred questions. Whenever he came back to Léa's house, he was full of his own importance and heavy with secrets which he at once divulged. He was like a schoolboy playing truant.

'Oh, my sainted aunt!' he shouted one day, cramming *his hat* down on Léa's portrait-bust. 'The goings-on at the Peloux Palace Hôtel ever since yesterday!'

She began by scolding him, laughing already in anticipation.

'Take your hat off that, in the first place. And in the second, don't invoke your wretched aunt in my house. Well, what's been happening now?'

'A riot, Nounoune! A riot's broken out among the ladies. Marie-Laure and Ma'me Peloux are scratching each other's eyes out over the marriage settlement!'

'No!'

'Yes! It was a superb sight. (Look out for the olives. ... I'm going to impersonate Ma'me Peloux as a windmill. ...) "Separate bank accounts! Separate bank accounts! Why not a trustee? It's a personal insult, a personal insult. You forget that my son has his own fortune! .. May I inform you, Madame ..."'

'She called her Madame?'

'She most certainly did. "Let me tell you, Madame, that my son has never had a ha'porth of debts since he came of age and the list of his investments bought since 1910 is worth .." is worth this, that, and the other, including the skin off my nose, plus the fat off my bottom. In short, Catherine de Medici in person! But even more artful, of course!'

Léa's blue eyes glistened with tears of merriment. 'Oh, Chéri! you've never been funnier in your life! What about the other? The fair Marie-Laure?'

my dress, I'm ready underneath, and what in the world is there to do on a day like this except to go to Schwabe and choose a pearl for you? You see, I must give you a wedding present.'

He jumped up, his face aglow: 'Top-hole! A pearl for my shirt-front! A pale pink pearl. I know the very one!'

'Not on your life! A white one, something masculine for pity's sake! Don't tell me, I know which one just as well as you. It'll ruin me, as usual. However, think of the money I'm going to save when you're out of the way!'

Chéri adopted a more reticent attitude. 'Oh, that ... that depends on my successor.'

Léa turned back at the door of her boudoir and gave him her gayest smile, showing her strong teeth and the fresh blue of her eyes skilfully darkened by bistre.

'Your successor? A couple of francs and a packet of cigarettes! And a glass of cassis on Sunday – that's all the job will be worth! And I'll settle money on your children.'

'I should hope not!' Léa sighed. 'Yet all the same ...' She broke off to reflect, and it seemed to Chéri her enthusiasm was flagging.

'Well, you must say it was pretty smart of me, eh?'

He leaned across the table; and the sunshine, playing over the silver and the white table-cloth, lit him up like a row of footlights.

'Yes ...' 'All the same,' she was thinking, 'that poisonous Marie-Laure simply treated him like a ponce. ...'

'Is there any cream cheese, Nounoune?'

'Yes ...' '... and he showed no more surprise than if she had thrown him a flower. ...'

'Nounoune, will you let me have that address? the address of the place where you get your cream cheese – for the new cook I've engaged for October?'

'Are you mad? It's home-made. I *have* a cook, you know. Think of the *sauce aux moules* and *vol-au-vent!*' '... it's true I've practically kept the boy for the last five years. ... But all the same he has an income of three hundred thousand francs a year. That's the point. Can you be a ponce with three hundred thousand a year? But why ever not? It doesn't depend on the amount, but on the man. ... There are some men I could have given half a million to, and that wouldn't make them a ponce. But how about Chéri? After all, I have never actually given him any money. All the same ...'

'All the same,' she broke into speech. 'She treated you like a gigolo!'

'Who did?'

'Marie-Laure!'

He brightened at once, like a child.

'Didn't she? Didn't she just, Nounoune? That's what she meant, wasn't it?'

'So it seems to me.'

Chéri raised his glass of Château-Chalon, almost the colour of brandy. 'So here's to Marie-Laure! What a compliment, eh? And if anyone can still say it of me when I'm your age, I shan't ask anything better!'

'If that's enough to make you happy ...'

She listened to him absent-mindedly till the end of luncheon. Accustomed to her half-silences and her worldly wisdom, he asked

'Her? Oh! terrible, Nounoune. That woman must have at least a dozen corpses in her wake. Dolled up in jade green, red hair, painted to look eighteen, and the inevitable smile. The trumpetings of my revered Mamma failed to make her bat an eyelid. She held her fire till the assault was over, then she came out with: "It might perhaps be wiser, dear Madame, not to talk too loudly about all the money your son put by in 1910 and the years following. ..."'

'Bang! Straight between the eyes! ... Between yours. Where were you while all this was going on?'

'Me? In the large armchair.'

'You were actually in the room?' She stopped laughing, and eating. 'You were there? What did you do?'

'Cracked a joke, of course. Ma'me Peloux had just seized hold of a valuable piece of bric-à-brac, to avenge my honour, when I stopped her without even getting up. "My adored mother, calm yourself. Follow my example, follow that of my charming mother-in-law, who's being as sweet as honey ... as sweet as sugar." And that's how I managed to arrange that the settlement should apply only to property acquired after marriage.'

'I simply don't understand.'

'The famous sugar plantations that the poor little Prince Ceste left to Marie-Laure by his will. ...'

'Yes?'

'Forged will! Fury of the Ceste family! Lawsuit pending! Now d'you get it?'

He crowed.

'I get it. But how did you get hold of the story?'

'Ah! I'll tell you! Old Lili has just pounced with her full weight upon the younger of the Ceste boys, who's only seventeen and religious. ...'

'Old Lili? What a nightmare!'

'And he babbles family secrets in her ear between every kiss. ...'

'Chéri! I feel sick!'

'And old Lili tipped me off at Mamma's At Home last Sunday. She simply adores me! Besides, she respects me because I've never wanted to go to bed with her. ...'

Chéri had not expected her to say this and showed it. His face became disfigured, and he suddenly turned white about the mouth. He controlled his breath to avoid an audible gasp, and became himself again.

'Nounoune, you'll always be there.'

'Monsieur overwhelms me.'

'There'll always be you, Nounoune ...' and he laughed awkwardly, 'whenever I need you to do something for me.'

She did not answer. She bent to pick up a tortoiseshell comb that had fallen to the floor and pushed it back in her hair, humming to herself. She went on humming a little snatch of a song in front of a looking-glass, pleased with herself, proud of having kept her self-control so easily, covered up so successfully the only emotional moment of their separation, proud of having held back words that must never be said. 'Speak . . beg for what you want, demand it, put your arms round my neck. ... You have suddenly made me happy. .'

'Baroness, don't forget I made ninety,' Madame Aldonza bleated like a goat.

'Score it, score it, my good friend! All I want is to see everyone happy.'

An endless flow of honied words masked her savage cruelty. Léa looked at her closely as if for the first time, felt disgusted, and turned back to Madame Peloux. 'Charlotte, at least, *looks* human,' she thought.

'What's the matter with you, my Léa? You don't seem your usual self?' Madame Peloux inquired tenderly.

Léa drew up her handsome figure and answered: 'Of course I am, Lolotte dear ... it's so comfortable here in your house, I was merely relaxing, thinking all the while "Careful now ... she's just as cruel as the other"', and she at once assumed an expression of flattering contentment, of dreamy repletion, and accentuated it by sighing, 'I lunched too well ... I really must get thinner. I shall start a strict diet from tomorrow.'

Madame Peloux flapped her hands and simpered.

'Isn't a broken heart enough to do that?'

'Oh, oh, oh! Ha-ha! Ho-ho!' guffawed Madame Aldonza and the Baroness de la Berche. 'Ha-ha-ha!'

Léa rose to her full height in her autumn dress of sombre green, handsome under her satin hat trimmed with sealskin, youthful among these old ruins over whom she cast a gentle eye. 'Oh, la-la, my dears! Give me a dozen such heart-breaks, if that would help me to lose a couple of pounds!'

'Lea, you're astounding,' the old baroness shot at her in a puff of smoke. 'Madame Léa, think of me, please, when you throw away that hat,' old Madame Aldonza begged. 'Madame Charlotte, you remember your blue one? It lasted me two years. Baroness, when you've quite finished ogling Madame Léa, perhaps you'll be kind enough to deal the cards to me.'

'Very well, my sweet, and may they bring you luck!'

Lea stopped for a moment by the door, then stepped out into the garden. She picked a tea-rose, which shed its petals. She listened to the breeze in the birch, to the trams in the Avenue, to the whistle of the local train The bench she sat on was warm, and she closed her

A slim youth with Italian features, enormous empty eyes, and a weak receding chin kissed Léa's hand hastily and retired into the shadows without a word. Lili caught him in flight, pulled his head down to her scaly chest, calling the onlookers to witness: 'Do you know what this is, Madame, do you know what this is? This, ladies, is the love of my life!'

'Restrain yourself, Lili!' Madame de la Berche advised in her masculine voice.

'But why? But why?' from Charlotte Peloux.

'For the sake of decency,' said the Baroness.

'Baroness, that's not nice of you! I think they're so sweet. Ah!' she sighed, 'they remind me of my own children.'

'I was thinking of them,' Lili said, with a delighted smile. 'It's our honeymoon too, Guido's and mine. Indeed, we've just come to ask about the other young couple! We want to hear all about them.'

Madame Peloux became stern. 'Lili, you don't expect me to go into details, do you?'

'Oh, yes, yes, I do,' Lili cried, clapping her hands. She tried to skip, but succeeded only in raising her shoulders and hips a little. 'That's always been my besetting sin, and always will be! I adore spicy talk! I'll never be cured of it. That little wretch there knows how I adore it.'

The silent youth, called to bear witness, did not open his mouth. The black pupils of his eyes moved up and down against the whites, like frantic insects. Léa watched him, rooted to the spot.

'Madame Charlotte told us all about the wedding ceremony,' bleated Madame Aldonza. 'The young Madame Peloux was a dream in her wreath of orange blossom!'

'A madonna! A madonna!' Madame Peloux corrected at the top of her voice, with a burst of religious fervour. 'Never, never, has anyone looked so divine. My son was in heaven! In heaven, I tell you! . . What a pair they made, what a pair!'

'You hear that, my passion? Orange blossom!' Lili murmured. 'And *tell me*, Charlotte, what about our mother-in-law, Marie-Laure?'

Madame Peloux's pitiless eyes sparkled. 'Oh, her! Out of place, absolutely out of place. In tight-fitting black, like an eel wriggling

'But, of course ... Princess Ceste, my dear! *la piccola principessa! Piccola principessa*, that's what my little Prince always calls me!'

She nipped hold of her skirt, and, in turning, displayed as gold curb-chain where her ankle ought to have been. 'Only', she continued mysteriously, 'his father ...'

By now out of breath, she made a sign to that silent young man, who took up the tale in a low rapid voice as if he were reciting his piece: 'My father, the Duke of Parese, threatens to put me in a convent if I marry Lili.'

'In a convent!' Charlotte Peloux squealed. 'A man in a convent!'

'A man in a convent!' neighed Madame de la Berche in her deep bass. 'Egad! if that isn't exciting!'

'They're barbarians,' Aldonza lamented, joining her misshapen hands together.

Léa rose so abruptly that she upset a glass.

'It's uncoloured glass,' Madame Peloux observed with satisfaction. 'You'll bring good luck to my young couple. Where are you running off to? Is your house on fire?'

Léa managed to squeeze out a sly little laugh: 'On fire? In a sense, perhaps. Ssh! no questions! It's a secret.'

'What? Already? It's not possible!' Charlotte Peloux cheeped enviously. 'I was just saying to myself that you looked as if ...'

'Yes, yes! You must tell us! Tell us everything,' yapped the three old women

Lili's quilted fists, old Aldonza's deformed stumps, Charlotte Peloux's hard fingers had seized upon her wrist, her sleeve, her gold-mesh bag. She snatched her arms away from all these claws and succeeded in laughing again, teasingly: 'No, it's far too early in the day, it would spoil everything! It's my secret.' And she rushed away to the hall

But the door opened in front of her and a desiccated old fellow, a sort of playful mummy, took her into his arms: 'Léa, lovely creature, a kiss for your little Berthellemy, or he won't let you pass!'

She gave a cry of fright and impatience, struck off the gloved bones retarding her progress, and fled.

thought it must be physical, a pain that twisted her lips and dragged from them, in a raucous sob, a single name: 'Chéri!'

Tears followed, beyond all control at first. As soon as she had regained her self-control, she sat up, wiped her face, and turned on the lamp again. 'Ah! That's what it is! Now I understand!'

She took a thermometer from the drawer of her bedside table and put it under her arm 'My temperature's normal, so it's nothing physical. I see. I'm just unhappy. Something must be done about it.'

She drank some water, got out of bed, bathed her inflamed eyes, put on a little powder, poked the fire, and went back to bed. She was on her guard, full of mistrust for an enemy she had never known: grief. She had just said goodbye to thirty years of easy living: years spent pleasantly, intent often on love, sometimes on money. This had left her, at almost fifty, still young and defenceless

She made fun of herself, ceased to feel her grief, and smiled. 'I think I was out of my mind just now. There's nothing wrong with me any longer.'

But a movement of her left arm, which bent automatically to hold and shelter a sleeping head, brought back all her agony, and she sat up with a jump 'Well, this is going to be fun!' she said out loud and sternly

She looked at the clock and saw that it was barely eleven. Overhead passed the slippered tread of the elderly Rose, on her way up the stairs to the attic floor. Then there was silence. Léa resisted the impulse to call out for help to this deferential old body. 'Don't give the servants anything to gossip about. We mustn't have that.'

She left her bed again, wrapped herself up warm in a quilted silk dressing-gown and toasted her feet. Then she half opened her window and listened for she knew not what. A moist and milder wind had brought clouds in its wake, and the lingering leaves in the neighbouring Bois sighed with every gust Léa shut the window again, picked up a newspaper, and looked at the date – 'October the twenty-sixth Exactly a month since Chéri was married!' She never said 'Since Edmée was married'.

Following Chéri's example, she did not yet count his young wraith of a wife as really alive. Chestnut-brown eyes, ashy hair which

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I send you an affectionate kiss. Remember me to the child when he comes back.

Your incorrigible
Léa.

P.S. – Don't trouble to come and interview my butler or concierge, no member of my household knows anything at all about it.

and find you've landed at the Pole – at the North Pole. There hasn't been a flower on the dahlias for the last week. But don't worry, my precious! Your love-nest will soon be finished. If the architect hadn't gone down with paratyphoid, it would be ready for you now. I warned him. If I told him once, I told him twenty times: "Monsieur Savaron ..."'

Chéri, who was standing by the window, turned round sharply. 'What was the date on that letter?'

Madame Peloux opened her large childlike eyes: 'What letter?'

'The letter from Léa you showed me.'

'She put no date on it, my love, but I got it the night before my last Sunday At Home in October.'

'I see. And you don't know who it is?'

'Who what is, my paragon?'

'Whoever it was she went away with, of course.'

Malice clothed Madame Peloux's stark features. 'No. Would you believe it, nobody has an idea! Old Lili is in Sicily, and none of my set has a clue! A mystery, an enthralling mystery! However, you know me, I've managed to pick up a few scraps here and there ...'

Chéri's dark eyes expanded: 'What's the tattle?'

'It seems it's a young man ...' Madame Peloux whispered. 'A young man not ... not particularly desirable, if you know what I mean ... very well made, of course!' She was lying, careful to insinuate the worst.

Chéri shrugged his shoulders.

'Well made, did you say? Don't make me laugh! My poor Léa! I can see him from here – a hefty little fellow from Patron's training-quarters – black hairs on his wrists and clammy hands. ... Well, I'm going back to bed now, you make me tired.'

Trailing his bedroom slippers, he went back to his room, dawdling in the long corridors and on the spacious landings of the house he seemed to be discovering for the first time. He ran into a pot-bellied wardrobe, and was amazed. 'Damned if I knew that thing was there. ... Oh, yes, I vaguely remember ... And who the devil's this chap?' He was addressing an enlarged photograph, in a deep black frame, hanging funereally near a piece of coloured pottery, equally unfamiliar to Chéri.

even when tired she still looked fresh. He seemed astonished by the smoothness of her fully rounded lower eyelids, and by the silvery softness of her cheeks.

'How old are you?' he asked suddenly.

Edmée opened her eyes, which she had closed voluptuously. Chéri stared at the brown of their pupils and at her small square teeth.

'Oh, come! I shall be nineteen on the fifth of January, and do try and remember it.'

He drew his arm away roughly and the young woman slipped into the hollow of the bed like a discarded scarf.

'Nineteen, it's prodigious! Do you know that I'm over twenty-five?'

'But of course I know that, Fred. ..'

He picked up a pale tortoiseshell mirror from the bed-table and gazed at himself. '*Twenty-five years old*!'

Twenty-five years of age and a face of white marble that seemed indestructible. Twenty-five, but at the outer corners of the eye and beneath it – delicately plagiarizing the classical design of the eyelid – were two lines, visible only in full light, two incisions traced by the lightest, the most relentless, of fingers.

He put back the mirror: 'You're younger than I am. That shocks me.'

'Not me!'

She had *answered* in a biting voice, full of hidden meaning. He took no notice.

'Do you know why my eyes are beautiful?' he asked in all seriousness.

'No,' Edmée said. 'Perhaps because I love them?'

'Stuff!' Chéri said, shrugging his shoulders. 'It's because they're shaped like a sole.'

'Like what?'

'Like a sole.'

He sat down near her to give a demonstration.

'Look – here – the corner next the nose is the head of the sole. And then – the upper curve, that's the back of the sole; whereas the lower line runs perfectly straight and that's its belly. And the other corner that tapers up to my temples, that's the sole's tail.'

rchitect's objections he would answer: 'I don't give a damn. I pay, want the work done. To hell with the cost.' But every now and gain he would cast a ruthless eye over an estimate and proclaim 'You can't bamboozle young Peloux.' Indeed, he held forth on standardization, fibro-cement, and coloured stucco with unexpected glibness and a memory for exact figures that compelled the contractor's respect.

Rarely did he consult his young wife, although he paraded his authority for her benefit and took pains, when occasion arose, to cover his deficiencies by giving curt commands. She was to find that he possessed an instinctive eye for colour, but had only contempt for beauty of shape and period differences.

'You simply clutter up your head with all that stuff and nonsense, what's your name, yes, you, Edmée. An idea for the smoking-room? All right, here's one. Blue for the walls – a ferocious blue. The carpet purple – a purple that plays second fiddle to the blue of the walls. Against that you needn't be afraid of using as much black as you like and a splash of gold in the furniture and ornaments.'

'Yes, you're right, Fred. But it will be rather drastic with all those strong colours. It's going to look rather charmless without a lighter note somewhere ... a white vase or a statue.'

'Nonsense,' he interrupted rather sharply. 'The white vase you want will be me – me, stark naked. And we mustn't forget a cushion or some thingumabob in pumpkin-red for when I'm running about stark naked in the smoking-room.'

Secretly attracted and at the same time disgusted, she cherished these fanciful ideas for turning their future home into a sort of disreputable palace, a temple to the greater glory of her husband. She offered little resistance, just gently requested 'some little corner' for a small and precious set of furniture upholstered with needlework on a white ground – a present from Marie-Laure.

This gentleness masked a determination that was young yet far from inexperienced, it stood her in good stead during the four months of camping out in her mother-in-law's house. It enabled her to evade, throughout these four months, the enemy stalking her, the traps laid daily to destroy her equanimity, her still susceptible gaiety, and her tact. Charlotte Peloux, over-excited at the proximity

'Yes, we're orphans, and we're so sweet!'

She clung to him. They were alone in the big sitting-room, for Madame Peloux was upstairs concocting, as Chéri put it, her poisons for the following day. The night was cold and the window panes reflected the lamplight and furnishings like a pond. Edmée felt warm and protected, safe in the arms of this unknown man. She lifted her head and gave a cry of alarm. He was staring up at the chandelier above them with a look of desperation on his magnificent features, and two tears hung glistening between the lids of his half-closed eyes.

'Chéri, Chéri, what's the matter with you?' On the spur of the moment she had called him by the too endearing nickname she had never meant to pronounce. He answered its appeal in bewilderment and turned his eyes down to look at her.

'Chéri, oh God! I'm frightened. What's wrong with you?'

He pushed her away a little, and held her facing him.

'Oh! Oh! You poor child, you poor little thing! What are you frightened of?'

He gazed at her with his eyes of velvet, wide-open, peaceful, inscrutable, all the more handsome for his tears. Edmée was about to beg him not to speak, when he said, 'How silly we are! It's the idea that we're orphans. It's idiotic. It's so true.'

He resumed his air of comic self-importance, and she drew a breath of relief, knowing that he would say no more. He began switching off all the lights with his usual care, and then turned to Edmée with a vanity that was either very simple or very deceitful: 'Well, why shouldn't I have a heart like everybody else?'

of so tender a victim, was inclined to lose her head and squander her barbs, using her claws indiscriminately.

'Keep calm, Madame Peloux,' Chéri would throw out from time to time. 'What bones will there be left for you to pick next winter if I don't stop you now?'

Edmée raised frightened, grateful eyes to her husband, and did her best not to think too much, not to look too much, at Madame Peloux. One evening Charlotte, almost heedlessly, three times tossed across the chrysanthemum table-piece Léa's name instead of Edmée's.

Chéri lowered his satanic eyebrows: 'Madame Peloux, I believe your memory is giving way. Perhaps a rest cure is indicated?'

Charlotte Peloux held her tongue for a whole week, but Edmée never dared to ask her husband: 'Did you get angry on my behalf? Was it me you were defending? Or was it that other woman, the one before me?'

Life as a child and then as a girl had taught her patience, hope, silence; and given her a prisoner's proficiency in handling these virtues as weapons. The fair Marie-Laure had never scolded her daughter. she had merely punished her. Never a hard word, never a tender one. Utter loneliness, then a boarding-school, then again loneliness in the holidays and frequent relegations to a bedroom. Finally, the threat of marriage – any marriage – from the moment that the eye of a too beautiful mother had discerned in the daughter the dawn of a rival beauty, shy, timid, looking a victim of tyranny, and all the more touching for that. In comparison with this inhuman gold-and-ivory mother, Charlotte Peloux and her spontaneous malice seemed a bed of roses.

'Are you frightened of my respected parent?' Chéri asked her one evening.

Edmée smiled and pouted to show her indifference: 'Frightened? No. You aren't frightened when a door slams, though it may make you jump. It's a snake creeping under it that's frightening.'

'A terrific snake, Marie-Laure, isn't she?'

'Terrific.'

He waited for confidences that did not come and put a brotherly arm round his wife's slender shoulders. 'We're sort of orphans, you and I, aren't we?'

transparence of a white rose in winter, and that their oval contour had shrunk.

'Love-letters,' he repeated. 'That's howlingly funny.'

He took a step forward, seized a fistful of papers and scattered them: post-cards, restaurant bills, tradespeople's announcements, telegrams from chorus girls met one night and never seen again, *pneumatiques* of four or five lines from sponging friends; and several close-written pages slashed with the sabre-like script of Madame Peloux.

Chéri turned round again to his wife: 'I have no love-letters.'

'Oh!' she protested. 'Why do *you* want –'

'I have none,' he interrupted; 'you can never understand. I've never noticed it myself until now. I can't have any love-letters because –' He checked himself. 'But wait, *wait.* ... Yes, there was one occasion, I remember, when I didn't want to go to La Bourboule, and it ... Wait, wait.'

He began pulling out drawers and feverishly tossing papers to the floor.

'That's too bad! What can I have done with it? I could have sworn it was in the upper left-hand ... No. ...'

He slammed back the empty drawers and glowered at Edmée.

'You found nothing? You didn't take a letter which began "But what do you expect, I'm not in the least bored. There's nothing better than to be separated one week in every month," and then went on to something else. I don't remember what, something about honeysuckle climbing high enough to look in at the window.'

He broke off, simply because his memory refused to come to his aid, and he was left gesticulating in his impatience.

Slim and recalcitrant, Edmée did not quail before him. She took refuge in caustic irritability. '*No*, no, I *took* nothing. Since when have I been capable of *taking* things? But if this letter is so very precious to you, how is it you've left it lying about? I've no need to inquire whether it was one of Léa's?'

He winced, but not quite in the manner Edmée had expected. The ghost of a smile hovered over his handsome, unresponsive features; and, with his head *on* one side, an expectant look in his eyes, and the delicious bow of his mouth taut-stretched, he might well have been listening to the echo of a name.

sat down by her side and continued to stroke her hair. The crisis of his own emotion was over, and he felt bored. He ran his eyes over Edmée as she lay sideways upon the unyielding settee. This straggling body, with its rucked-up frock and trailing scarf, added to the disorder of the room; and this displeased him.

Soft as was his sigh of boredom, she heard it and sat up. 'Yes,' she said, 'I'm more than you can stand. ... Oh! it would be better to ...'

He interrupted her, fearing a torrent of words: 'It's not that. It's simply that I don't know what you want.'

'What I want? How d'you mean, what I ...'

She lifted her face, still wet with tears.

'Now listen to me.' He took her hands.

She tried to free herself. 'No, no, I know that tone of voice. You're going to treat me to another of those nonsensical outbursts. When you put on that tone of voice and face, I know you're going to prove that your eye is shaped like a striped super-mullet, or that your mouth looks like the figure three on its side. No, no, I can't stand that!'

Her recriminations were childish, and Chéri relaxed, feeling that after all they were both very young. He pressed her warm hands between his own.

'But you must listen to me! ... Good God! I'd like to know what you've got to reproach me with! Do I ever go out in the evenings without you? No! Do I often leave you on your own during the day? Do I carry on a secret correspondence?'

'I don't know – I don't think so –'

He turned her this way and that like a doll.

'Do I have a separate room? Don't I make love to you well?'

She hesitated, smiling with exquisite suspicion. 'Do you call that love, Fred?'

'There are other words for it, but you wouldn't appreciate them.'

'What you call love ... isn't it possible that it may be, really, a ... kind . . of alibi?' She hastened to add, 'I'm merely generalizing, Fred, of course ... I said "*may be*", in certain cases. ...'

He dropped Edmée's hands. 'That', he said coldly, 'is putting your foot right in it.'

The full force of Edmée's young and ill-disciplined emotions burst forth in a series of sobs and tears, and her fingers writhed and twisted as if ready to scratch. 'Go away! I hate you! You've never loved me. I might not so much as exist, for all the notice you take of me! You hurt me, you despise me, you're insulting, you're, you're... You think only of that old woman! It's not natural, it's degenerate, it's ... You don't love me! Why, oh why, did you ever marry me?... You're ... you're ...'

She was tossing her head like an animal caught by the neck, and as she leaned back to take a deep breath, because she was suffocating, the light fell on her string of small, milky, evenly matched pearls. Chéri stared in stupefaction at the controlled movements of the lovely throat, at the hands clasped together in appeal, and above all at the tears, her tears. ... He had never seen such a torrent of tears. For who had ever wept in front of him, or wept because of him? No one. Madame Peloux? 'But', he thought, 'Madame Peloux's tears don't count.' Léa? No. Searching his memory, he appealed to a pair of honest blue eyes; but they had sparkled with pleasure only, or malice, or a rather mocking tenderness. Such floods of tears poured down the cheeks of this writhing young woman. What could be done about all these tears? He did not know. All the same, he stretched out an arm, and as Edmée drew back, fearing some brutality perhaps, he placed his beautiful, gentle, scented hand on her head and patted her ruffled hair. He did his best to copy the tone and speech of a voice whose power he knew so well: 'There, there. ... What's it all about? What's the matter, then? There ... there. ...'

Edmée collapsed suddenly, fell back huddled in a heap on a settee, and broke out into frenzied and passionate sobbing that sounded like yells of laughter or howls of joy. As she lay doubled up, her graceful body heaved and rocked with grief, jealousy, fury, and an unsuspected servility. And yet, like a wrestler in the heat of a struggle, or a swimmer in the hollow of a wave, she felt bathed in some strange new atmosphere, both natural and harsh.

She had a good long cry, and recovered by slow degrees, with periods of calm shaken by great shudders and gasps for breath. Chéri

generally manages to receive more than she gives. Do you hear what I say?'

What she heard above all was that he was now addressing her like a stray acquaintance.

'Nineteen years old, white skin, hair that smells of vanilla; and then, in bed, closed eyes and limp arms. That's all very pretty, but is there anything unusual about it? Do you really think it so very unusual?'

She had started at each word, and each sting had goaded her towards the duel of female versus male.

'It may be very unusual,' she said in a steady voice, 'how could *you* know?'

He did not answer, and she hastened to take advantage of a hit. 'Personally, I saw much handsomer men than you when we were in Italy. The streets were full of them. My nineteen years are worth those of any *other* girl of my age, just as one good-looking man is as good as the next. Don't worry, everything can be arranged. Nowadays, marriage is not an important undertaking. Instead of allowing silly scenes to make us bitter ...'

He put a stop to what she had to say by an almost pitying shake of the head.

'My poor kid, it's not so simple as that.'

'Why not? There's such a thing as quick divorce, if one's ready to pay.'

She spoke in the peremptory manner of a runaway schoolgirl, and it was pathetic. She had pushed back the hair off her forehead, and her anxious, intelligent eyes were made to look all the darker by the soft contours of her cheeks now fringed with hair: the eyes of an unhappy woman, eyes mature and definitive in a still undeveloped face.

'That wouldn't help at all,' Chéri said.

'Because?'

'Because . .' He leaned forward with his eyelashes tapered into pointed wings, shut his eyes and opened them again as if he had just swallowed a bitter pill. 'Because you love me.'

She noticed that he had resumed the more familiar form of addressing her, and above all the fuller, rather choked tones of their

He was walking along with a light step, stimulated by the rathe spring, perceptible in the moist gusty wind and the exciting earthy smells of squares and private gardens. Every now and again a fleeting glimpse in a glass would remind him that he was wearing a becoming felt hat, pulled down over the right eye, a loose-fitting spring coat, large light-coloured gloves, and a terra-cotta tie. The eyes of women followed his progress with silent homage, the more candid among them bestowing that passing stupefaction which can be neither feigned nor hidden. But Chéri never looked at women in the street. He had just come from his house in the Avenue Henri-Martin, having left various orders with the upholsterers: orders contradicting one another, but thrown out in a tone of authority.

On reaching the end of the Avenue, he took a deep breath of the good spring scents carried up from the Bois on the heavy moist wing of the west wind, and then hurried on his way to the Porte Dauphine. Within a few minutes he had reached the lower end of the Avenue Bugeaud, and there he stopped. For the first time in six months his feet were treading the familiar road. He unbuttoned his coat.

'I've been walking too fast,' he said to himself. He started off again, then paused and, this time, trained his eyes on one particular spot: fifty yards or so down the road – bareheaded, shammy-leather in hand, Ernest the concierge – Léa's concierge – was 'doing' the brasswork of the railings in front of Léa's house. Chéri began to hum, realized from the sound of his voice that he never did hum, and stopped.

'How are things, Ernest? Hard at work as usual?'

The concierge brightened respectfully.

'Monsieur Peloux! It's a pleasure to see Monsieur again. Monsieur has not changed at all.'

'Neither have you, Ernest. Madame is well, I hope?'

He turned his head away to gaze up at the closed shutters on the first floor.

happiest hours. In her heart of hearts she acquiesced: 'It's true, I love him. At the moment, there's no remedy.'

The dinner bell sounded in the garden – a bell which was too small, dating from before Madame Peloux's time, a sad clear bell reminiscent of a country orphanage. Edmée shivered. 'Oh, I don't like that bell. ...'

'No?' said Chéri, absent-mindedly.

'In our house, dinner *will* be announced. There'll be no bell. There'll be *no* boarding-house habits in our home – you'll see.'

She spoke these words without turning round, while walking down the hospital-green corridor, and so did not see, behind her, either the fierce attention Chéri paid to her last words, or his silent laughter.

This last word recalled a sight that one hour had sufficed to banish from his mind: a large square room – his own nursery; an anxious young woman standing by the window; and Charlotte Peloux, subdued by a Martini.

'Oh, no,' he said aloud. 'Not that! That's all over.'

He signalled to a taxi with his raised stick.

'To the ... er ... to the Restaurant du Dragon Bleu.'

Chéri crossed the grill-room to the sound of violins in the glare of the atrocious electric light, and this had a tonic effect. He shook the hand of a maître d'hôtel who recognized him. Before him rose the stooping figure of a tall young man. Chéri gave an affectionate gasp. 'Desmond, the very man I wanted to see! Howdydo?'

They were shown to a table decorated with pink carnations. A small hand and a towering aigrette beckoned towards Chéri from a neighbouring table.

'It's La Loupiote,' Vicomte Desmond warned him.

Chéri had no recollection of La Loupiote, but he smiled towards the towering aigrette and, without getting up, touched the small hand with a paper fan lying on his table. Then he put on his most solemn 'conquering hero' look, and swept his eyes over an unknown couple. The woman had forgotten to eat since he had sat down in her vicinity.

'The man with her looks a regular cuckold, doesn't he?'

He had leaned over to whisper into his friend's ear, and his eyes shone with pleasure as if with rising tears.

'What d'you drink, now you're married?' Desmond asked. 'Camomile tea?'

'Pommery,' Chéri said.

'And before the Pommery?'

'Pommery, before and after.' And, dilating his nostrils, he sniffed as he remembered some sparkling, rose-scented old champagne of 1889 that Léa kept for him alone.

He ordered a meal that a shopgirl out on the spree might choose – cold fish *au porto*, a roast bird, and a piping hot soufflé which concealed in its innards a red ice, sharp on the tongue.

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giving Léa's virtues their due. He extolled the submissive sweetness of his young wife, and thus found occasion to criticize Léa's independence of character. 'Oh, the old devil, she had her own ideas about everything, I can tell you!'

He went a step further in his confidences, speaking of Léa with severity, and even impertinence. He was sheltering behind idiotic words, prompted by the suspicions of a *deceived* lover, and at the same time enjoying the subtle pleasure of being able to speak of her without danger. A little more, and he would have sullied her name, while his heart was rejoicing in his own memories of her: sullied the soft sweet name which he *had* been unable to mention freely during the last six months, and the whole gracious vision he had of Léa, leaning over him with her two or three irreparable wrinkles, and her beauty, now lost to him, but – alas – ever present.

About eleven o'clock they rose to go, chilled by the emptiness of the almost deserted restaurant. However, at the next table, La Loupiote was busy writing letters and had called for telegraph forms. She raised her white, inoffensive, sheeplike head as the two friends passed by. 'Well, aren't you even going to say good evening?'

'Good evening,' Chéri condescended to say.

La Loupiote drew her friend's attention to Chéri's good looks. 'Would you believe it! And to think that he's got such pots of money. Some people have everything!'

But when Chéri merely *offered* her an open cigarette-case, she became vituperative. 'They have everything, except the knowledge of how to make proper use of it. Go back home to your mother, dearie!'

'Look here,' Chéri said to Desmond when they were outside in the narrow street. 'Look here, I was about to ask you, Desmond ... Wait till we get away from this beastly crowd. ...'

The soft damp evening air had kept people lingering in the streets, but the theatre-goers from the Rue Caumartin onwards had not yet packed the Boulevard. Chéri took his friend by the arm. 'Look here, Desmond ... I wanted you to make another telephone call.'

Desmond stopped, 'Again?'

'You'll ask for Wagram–'

'17–08.'

white bedroom and the imitation Empire furniture of the sitting-room smiled at Chéri like old friends. He took a bath, borrowed one of Desmond's silk night-shirts which was too tight for him, got into bed, and, wedged between two huge soft pillows, sank into dreamless bliss, into the dark depths of a sleep that protected him from all attacks.

The Pal smoked opium, and gave it to others. The instant you came into her modest, ground-floor flat, you smelt escaping gas and stale drugs. She won the hearts of her guests by a tearful cordiality and by a constant incitement to self-pity – both objectionable traits. She treated Desmond, when he paid her a visit, as 'a great big desperately lonesome boy', ... and Chéri as 'a beauty who has got everything and it only makes him more miserable'. Chéri never touched the pipe; he looked at the small box of cocaine with the repugnance of a cat about to be dosed, and spent most of the night with his back against the cushioned dado, sitting up on a straw mat between Desmond, who went to sleep, and the Pal, who never stopped smoking. For most of the night he breathed in the fumes that satisfy all hunger and thirst, but his self-control and distrust persisted. He appeared to be perfectly happy, except that he stared now and then, with pained and questioning intensity, at the Pal's withered throat – a skinny, far too red throat, round which shimmered a string of false pearls.

Once, he stretched out a hand and with the tip of his fingers touched the henna-tinted hair on the nape of her neck. He judged the weight of the big light hollow pearls with his hand, then snatched it back with the nervous shiver of someone who catches his finger-nail on a piece of frayed silk. Not long after, he got up and went.

'Aren't you sick to death of all this,' Desmond asked Chéri, 'sick of these poky holes where we eat and drink and never have any girls? Sick of this hotel with the doors always slamming? Sick of the night clubs where we go in the evenings, and of dashing in that fast car of yours from Paris to Rouen, *Paris to Compiègne, Paris to Ville d'Avray*? ... Why not the Riviera for a change? The season down there isn't December and January, it's March, April, or – '

'No,' said Chéri.

'Then what?'

'Then nothing.'

Chéri affected to become amiable and put *on what Léa* used to call 'his air of worldly superiority'.

'Dear old boy ... you don't seem to appreciate the beauty of Paris

shirts, and shirts as fine as your pants. Desmond, is today the seventeenth?'

'Yes, why?'

'The seventeenth of March. In other words, spring. Desmond, people who think themselves smart, I mean those in the height of fashion, women or men – can they afford to wait any longer before buying their spring wardrobes?'

'Hardly –'

'The seventeenth, Desmond! Come along at once; everything's all right. We're going to buy a huge bracelet for my wife, an enormous cigarette-holder for Madame Peloux, and a tiny tie-pin for you.'

On more than one such occasion he had felt an overwhelming presentiment that Léa was on the point of returning; that she was already back in her house; that the first-floor shutters had been opened, allowing a glimpse of the flowered pink net curtains across the windows, the lace of the full-length curtains at each side, and the glint of the looking-glasses. ... The fifteenth of April went by and still there was no sign of Léa.

The mournful monotony of Chéri's existence was tempered by several provoking incidents. There was a visit from Madame Peloux, who thought she was breathing her last when she found Chéri looking as thin as a greyhound, eyes wandering, and mouth tight shut. There was the letter from Edmée: a letter all in the same surprising tone, explaining that she would stay on at Neuilly 'until further orders', and had undertaken to pass on to Chéri 'Madame de la Berche's best regards'. ... He thought she was laughing at him, did not know what to answer, and ended by throwing away the enigmatic screed, but he did not go to Neuilly.

April advanced, leafy, cold, bright, and scenting all Paris with tulips, bunches of hyacinths, pawlonias, and laburnums like dropping-wells of gold. Chéri buried himself all the deeper in austere seclusion. The harassed, ill-treated, angry but well-paid Vicomte Desmond was given his orders: now to protect Chéri from familiar young women and indiscreet young men; now to recruit both sections and form a troop, who ate, drank, and rushed screaming at the top of their voices between Montmartre, the restaurants in the Bois, and the cabarets on the left bank.

He straightened up at the sound of a voice. Ernest, the concierge, was shouting in the passage: 'At nine tomorrow, Marcel will help me carry up the big black trunk, Madame.'

Chéri turned round in a flash and ran as far as the Avenue du Bois. There he sat down. In front of his eyes danced the image of the electric globe he had been staring at – a dark purple ball fringed with gold, against a black group of trees in bud. He pressed his hand to his heart, and took a deep breath. Early lilac blossom scented the night air. He threw his hat away, undid the buttons of his overcoat, and, leaning back on a seat, let himself go, his legs outstretched and his hands hanging feebly by his sides. A crushing yet delicious weight had just fallen upon him. 'Ah!' he whispered, 'so this is what they call happiness. I never knew.'

For a moment he gave way to self-pity and self-contempt. How many good things had he missed by leading such a pointless life – a young man with lots of money and little heart! Then he stopped thinking for a moment, or possibly for an hour. Next, he persuaded himself there was nothing in the world he wanted, not even to go and see Léa.

When he found himself shivering in the cold, and heard the blackbirds carolling the dawn, he got up and, stumbling a little but lighthearted, set off towards the Hôtel Morris without passing through the Avenue Bugeaud. He stretched himself, filled his lungs with the morning air, and overflowed with goodwill to all.

'Now,' he sighed, the devil driven out of him, 'now ... Oh now you'll see just how nice to the girl I shall be.'

Shaved, shod, and impatient – he had been up since eight – Chéri shook Desmond. Sleep gave him a swollen look, livid and quite frightful, like a drowned man. 'Desmond! Hey, Desmond! Up you get. ... You look too hideous when you're asleep!'

The sleeper woke, sat up, and turned towards Chéri eyes the colour of clouded water. He pretended to be fuddled with sleep so that he could make a long and close examination of Chéri – Chéri dressed in blue, pathetic, superb, and pale under the lightest coat of powder.

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hilaration that it dazed him, and he fancied he had heard it actually spoken.

'What did you say?' he asked Desmond.

'I never said a word,' his well-trained friend said stiffly. 'It must have been someone talking outside in the courtyard.'

Chéri went out, slamming the door behind him, and returned to his own rooms. They were filled with the dim continual hubbub of the fully awakened Rue de Rivoli, and Chéri, through the open window, could see the spring foliage, the leaves stiff and transparent like thin jade knives against the sun. He closed the window and sat down on a useless little chair which stood against the wall in a dingy corner between his bed and the bathroom door.

'How can it be? ...' he began in a low voice, and then said no more. He did not understand why it was that during the last six and a half months he had hardly given a thought to Léa's lover. '*I'm making a perfect fool of myself*,' were the actual words of the letter so piously preserved by Charlotte Peloux.

'A perfect fool?' Chéri shook his head. 'It's funny, but that's not how I see her at all. What sort of a man can she be in love with? Somebody like Patron – rather than like Desmond, of course. An oily little Argentine? Maybe. Yet all the same ...' He smiled a simple smile. 'Apart from me, who is there she could possibly care for?'

A cloud passed over the sun and the room darkened. Chéri leaned his head against the wall. 'My Nounoune ... My Nounoune ... Have you betrayed me? Are you beastly enough to deceive me? ... Have you really done that?'

He tried to give a sharper edge to his suffering by a misuse of his imagination: the words and sights it presented left him more astonished than enraged. He did his best to evoke the elation of early morning delights when he was living with Léa, the solace of the prolonged and perfect silences of certain afternoons, with Léa – the delicious sleepy hours in winter spent in a warm bed in a freshly aired room, with Léa ...; but, all the time, in the suffused cherry-coloured afternoon light aflame behind the curtains of Léa's room, he saw in Léa's arms one lover and one lover only – Chéri. He jumped up, revived by a spontaneous act of faith. 'It's as simple as that! If

much at his ease, sniffing the green smell of the newly mown lawns, Chéri entered the house and with a master's step climbed the stairs to the young woman whom he had left behind three months before, much as a sailor from Europe leaves behind, on the other side of the world, a little savage bride.

are ... well, who are impossible, impossible, impossible. ...'

She heard, so fresh was her memory, voices that had called out to her from the top of hotel steps or hailed her with a 'Hoo-hoo' from afar, across golden sands, and she lowered her head in anger like a bull.

She had returned, after an absence of six months, thinner, more flabby, less serene. Now and again a nervous twitch of the jaw jerked her chin down against her neck, and careless henna-shampooing had left too orange a glint in her hair, but her skin had been tanned to amber by sea and wind. This gave her the glowing complexion of a handsome farmer's wife, and she might have done without rouge. All the same, she would have to arrange something carefully round her neck, not to say cover it up completely; for it had shrunk and was encircled with wrinkles that had been inaccessible to sunburn.

Still seated, she dawdled over tidying away her various odds and ends, and her eyes began to glance round the room, as if some chair were missing. But what she was looking for was her old energy, the old anxiety to see at once that everything was as it should be in her comfortable home

'Oh! That trip!' she sighed. 'How could I? How exhausting it all is!'

She frowned, once again with that irritable jerk of her chin, when she noticed the broken glass of a little picture by Chaplin which she thought perfectly lovely – the head of a young girl, all silver and rose.

'And I could put both hands through that tear in the lace curtains ... And that's only the beginning. ... What a fool I was to stay away so long! And all in *his* honour! As if I couldn't just as well have nursed my grief here, in peace and comfort!'

She rose, disgruntled, and, gathering up the flounces of her tea-gown, went over to ring the bell, saying to herself, 'Get along with you, you old baggage!'

Her maid entered, under a heap of underclothes and silk stockings.

'Eleven o'clock, Rose. And my face hasn't been done yet. I'm late.'

'There's nothing to be late for. There aren't any old maids now to drag Madame off on excursions, or turn up at crack of dawn to pick

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on the wooden balcony, all the creature comforts that Léa dispensed with such justifiable pride. But the idiot had felt sore and gone away, leaving Léa to the attentions of a stiff, handsome officer, greying at the temples, who aspired to marriage with 'Madame de Lonval'.

'Our years, our fortunes, the taste we both have for independence and society, doesn't everything show that we were destined for each other?' murmured the colonel, who still kept his slim waist.

She laughed, and enjoyed the company of this dry, dapper man, who ate well and knew how to hold his liquor. He mistook her feelings and he read into the lovely blue eyes, and the trustful, lingering smiles of his hostess, the acceptance he was expecting. The end of their dawning friendship was marked by a decisive gesture on her part, one she regretted in her heart of hearts and for which she was honest enough to accept the blame. 'It's my own fault. One should never treat a Colonel Ypoustègue, descendant of an ancient Basque family, as one would treat a Monsieur Roland. I've never given anyone such a snub. All the same, it would have been gentlemanly, and intelligent too, if he had come back as usual the next day in his dog-cart, to smoke his cigar, meet the two old girls, and pull their legs.'

She failed to understand that a middle-aged man could accept his dismissal, but not certain glances – glances appraising his physique, comparing him in that respect so unmistakably with another, unknown and invisible. Léa, caught in his sudden kiss, had subjected him to the searching, formidable gaze of a woman who knows exactly where to find the tell-tale marks of age. From the dry, well-cared-for hands, ribbed with veins and tendons, her glance rose to the pouched chin and furrowed brows, returning cruelly to the mouth entrapped between double lines of inverted commas. Whereupon all the aristocratic refinement of the 'Baroness de Lonval' collapsed in an 'Oh, la la,' so insulting, so explicit, so common, that the handsome figure of Colonel Ypoustègue passed through her door for the last time.

'The last of my idylls,' Léa was thinking, as she leaned out over her window-ledge. But the weather over Paris was fine, her echoing courtyard was dapper, with its laurel trees rising ball-shaped in green

And she shook her head, laughing softly to herself, like a mother whose son has stayed out all night for the first time.

A bright varnished park-phaeton flashed past her gates, sparkled behind its prancing high-steppers and vanished almost without a sound on its rubber wheels.

'There goes Spéleieff,' Léa observed, 'he's a good sort. And there goes Merguillier on his piebald: eleven o'clock. It won't be long before that dried-up old Berthellemy passes on his way to thaw out his bones on the Sentier de la Vertu. Curious how people can go on doing the same thing day after day! I could almost believe I'd never left Paris, except that Chéri isn't here. My poor Chéri! He's finished with, for the present. Night-life, women, eating at any hour, drinking too much. It's a pity. He might have turned into a decent sort, perhaps, if he'd only had pink chaps like a pork-butcher and flat feet. ...'

She left the window, rubbing her numbed elbows, and shrugged her shoulders. 'Chéri could be saved once, but not a second time.' She polished her nails, breathed on a tarnished ring, peered closely at the disastrous red of her hair and its greying roots, and jotted down a few notes on a pad. She did everything at high speed and with less composure than usual, trying to ward off an attack of her old insidious anxiety. Familiar as this was, she denied its connexion with her grief and called it 'her moral indigestion'. She began wanting first one thing, then suddenly another – a well-sprung victoria with a quiet horse appropriate to a dowager; then a very fast motor-car; then a suite of Directoire furniture. She even thought of doing her hair differently; for twenty years she had worn it high, brushed straight off the neck. 'Rolled curls low on the neck, like Lavallière? Then I should be able to cope with this year's loose-waisted dresses. With a strict diet, in fact, and my hair properly hennaed, I can hope for ten – no, let's say five years more of ...'

With an effort she recovered her good sense, her pride, her lucidity. 'A woman like me would never have the courage to call a halt? Nonsense, my pretty, we've had a good run for our money.' She surveyed the tall figure, erect, hands on hips, smiling at her from the looking-glass. She was still Léa.

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A bright varnished park-phaeton flashed past her gates, sparkled behind its prancing high-steppers and vanished almost without a sound on its rubber wheels.

'There goes Spéleieff,' Léa observed, 'he's a good sort. And there goes Merguilher on his piebald- eleven o'clock. It won't be long before that dried-up old Berthellemy passes on his way to thaw out his bones on the Sentier de la Vertu. Curious how people can go on doing the same thing day after day! I could almost believe I'd never left Paris, except that Chéri isn't here. My poor Chéri! He's finished with, for the present. Night-life, women, eating at any hour, drinking too much. It's a pity. He might have turned into a decent sort, perhaps, if he'd only had pink chaps like a pork-butcher and flat feet....'

She left the window, rubbing her numbed elbows, and shrugged her shoulders 'Chéri could be saved once, but not a second time.' She polished her nails, breathed on a tarnished ring, peered closely at the disastrous red of her hair and its greying roots, and jotted down a few notes on a pad. She did everything at high speed and with less composure than usual, trying to ward off an attack of her old insidious anxiety. Familiar as this was, she denied its connexion with her grief and called it 'her moral indigestion'. She began wanting first one thing, then suddenly another – a well-sprung victoria with a quiet horse appropriate to a dowager; then a very fast motor-car, then a suite of Directoire furniture. She even thought of doing her hair differently; for twenty years she had worn it high, brushed straight off the neck. 'Rolled curls low on the neck, like Lavallière? Then I should be able to cope with this year's loose-waisted dresses. With a strict diet, in fact, and my hair properly hennaed, I can hope for ten – no, let's say five years more of ...'

With an effort she recovered her good sense, her pride, her lucidity 'A woman like me would never have the courage to call a halt? Nonsense, my pretty, we've had a good run for our money.' She surveyed the tall figure, erect, hands on hips, smiling at her from the looking-glass. She was still Léa.

athlete, Léa went as far out as the Place d'Italie, at considerable risk to her dark sapphire-blue dress, heavy with gold embroidery, to her birds of paradise, her impressive jewels, and her new rich red-tinted coiffure. She had had enough after one sniff of the sweat, vinegar, and turpentine exuded by Patron's 'white hopes', and she left, deciding never to venture again inside that long, low, gas-hissing hall.

An unaccountable weariness followed her every attempt to get back into the hustling life of people with nothing to do.

'What can be the matter with me?'

She rubbed her ankles, a little swollen by evening, looked at her strong teeth, and gums that had hardly begun to recede; and thumped her strong ribs and healthy stomach as if sounding a cask. Yet some indefinable weight, now that the chock had been knocked from under her, was shifting within her, and dragging her down. It was the Baroness de la Berche – met by chance in a 'public bar' where she was washing down two dozen snails with cabbies' white wine – who in the end informed her of the prodigal's return to the fold, and of the dawn of a crescent honeymoon in the Boulevard d'Inkermann. Léa listened calmly to this Moral Tale; but she turned pale with emotion the following day when she recognized the blue limousine outside her gates and saw Charlotte Peloux on her way to the house.

'At last, at last! Here you are again, Léa, my beauty! ... Lovelier than ever! Thinner than last year! Take care, Léa, we mustn't get too thin at our age! So far, and no further! And yet ... But what a treat it is to see you!'

Never had that bitter tongue sounded so sweet to Léa. She let Madame Peloux prattle on, thankful for the breathing-space afforded by this acid stream. She had settled Charlotte Peloux into a deep armchair, in the soft light of the little pink-panelled salon, as in the old days. Automatically she had herself taken the straight-backed chair, which forced her to lift her shoulders and keep up her chin, as in the old days. Between them stood the table covered by a cloth of heavy embroidery, and on it, as in the old days, the large cut-glass decanter half full of old brandy, the shimmering petal-thin goblets, iced water, and shortbread biscuits.

'My beauty, now we'll be able to see each other again in peace, in peace. You know my motto: "When in trouble, shun your friends:

lead the life of a bachelor! And now he's done it with a vengeance!'

'It's a very good thing that he did,' Léa said, without the flicker of a smile; 'it acts as a sort of guarantee to his wife for the future.'

'The very word, the very word I was hunting for!' barked Madame Peloux, beaming. 'A guarantee! And ever since that day – one long dream! And, you know, when a Peloux does come home again after being properly out on the spree, he never goes off again!'

'Is that a family tradition?' Léa asked.

But Charlotte took no notice.

'And what's more, he was very well received when he did return home. His little wife – ah, there's a little wife for you, Léa! – and I've seen a fair number of little wives in my time, you know, and I don't mind telling you I've never seen one to hold a candle to Edmée!'

'Her mother is so remarkable,' Léa said.

'Think, just think, my beauty – Chen left her on my hands for very nearly three months! and between you and me she was very lucky to have me there.'

'That's exactly what I was thinking,' Léa said.

'And then, my dear, never a word of complaint, never a scene, never a tactless word! Nothing, nothing! She was patience itself, and sweetness ... and the face of a saint, a saint!'

'It's terrifying,' Léa said

'And then, what d'you suppose happened when our young rascal walked in one morning, all smiles, as though he'd just come in from a stroll in the Bois? D'you suppose she allowed herself a single comment? Not one. Far from it. Nothing. As for him, though at heart he must have felt just a little ashamed ...'

'Oh, why?' Léa asked.

'Well, really! After all ... He was welcomed with open arms, and the whole thing was put right in their bedroom – in two ticks – just like that – no time lost! Oh, I can assure you, for the next hour or so there wasn't a happier woman in the world than me.'

'Except, perhaps, Edmée,' Léa suggested.

But Madame Peloux was all exaltation, and executed a superb soaring movement with her little arms: 'I don't know what you can be thinking of. Personally, I was only thinking of the happy hearth and home.'



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'Imperturbable?'

'That's the word! For instance, when he knew I was coming to see you ...'

'Did he know, then?'

An impetuous blush leapt to Léa's cheeks, and she cursed her hot blood and the bright daylight of the little drawing-room. Madame Peloux, a benign expression in her eyes, fed on Léa's confusion.

'But of course he knew. That oughtn't to bring a blush to your cheeks, my beauty. What a child you are!'

'In the first place, how did you know I was back?'

'Oh, come, Léa, don't ask such foolish questions. You've been seen about everywhere.'

'Yes, but Chéri – did you tell him I was back?'

'No, my beauty, it was he who told me.'

'Oh, it was he who ... That's funny.'

She heard her heart beating in her voice and dared not risk more than the shortest answers.

'He even added "Madame Peloux, you'll oblige me by going to find out news of Nounoune." He's still so fond of you, the dear boy.'

'How nice!'

Madame Peloux, crimson in the face, seemed to abandon herself to the influence of the old brandy and talked as in a dream, wagging her head from side to side. But her russet eyes remained fixed and steely, and she kept a close watch on Léa, who was sitting bolt upright, armed against herself, waiting for the next thrust.

'It's nice, but it's quite natural. A man doesn't forget a woman like you, Léa dear And .. if you want to know what I really think, you've only to lift a finger and ...'

Léa put a hand on Charlotte Peloux's arm. 'I don't want to know what you really think,' she said gently.

The corners of Madame Peloux's mouth fell. 'Oh, I can understand, I approve,' she sighed in a passionless voice. 'When one has made other arrangements for one's life, as you have ... I haven't even had a word with you about yourself!'

'But it seems to me that you have.'

'Happy?'